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Symposium Conclusion: Gradualism Is No Longer Workable in the Anti-Black Racism Struggle

Julius A. Amin, Alumni Chair in Humanities

Weeks before his death, Frederick Douglass was asked what message he had for the next generation of civil rights activists, and he replied: “Agitate! Agitate! Agitate!” Douglass devoted his life to human causes. Born into slavery, he escaped from it, paid for his freedom, and later became one of the most potent abolitionists and human rights activists of modern times. Racism, he argued, made a mockery of America’s political, economic, and social institutions, and he summoned the nation to “reform the national heart, quicken the national conscience, root out wicked prejudices ... and destroy the great moral evils.” His message shaped civil rights activism for many generations to come. Fittingly, his words are engraved on the University of Dayton Jesse Philips Humanities Building. The Symposium on Race was built on the tradition to agitate for change. It invited the campus community and beyond to close ranks and end this “mockery” on America’s identity. While the symposium lauded campus initiatives such as creating an anti-racism environment, it noted that colleges and universities have pursued the tactic of gradualism in the area of racial reform.

Though American colleges have wrestled with a variety of challenges at different times, the one constant problem has been anti-Black racism. It is a focus at the symposium. University of Dayton alumni articulated many challenges faced by Black students on campus. Representing different generations, speakers discussed their UD

experience, and irrespective of the decade in which they were students at the University, their descriptions of marginalization were strikingly similar. Currently enrolled Black students told similar stories to those discussed decades ago. Unable to fully integrate themselves into campuswide culture, Black students easily found solace in the multicultural office. Alumni spoke of feelings of loneliness, isolation, and marginalization on campus. Given that campus values are driven by institutional structures, as long as those structures remain unreformed, little will change. The administration must be bold, vigorous, and result-oriented in its anti-Black racism actions.

An additional and particularly significant issue that shaped the nature of the Symposium was COVID-19 and its adverse impact. Speakers at the Symposium spoke about the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on communities of color. America's 46th president, Joe Biden, vowed to bring change to communities of color. Repeatedly, he informed Black audiences of his gratitude to them, stating he would not forget the role Black voters played in his election as president. His selection of Amanda Gorman to deliver the inaugural poem set the tone. In her poem, "The Hill We Climb," Gorman challenged America to be bold as it seeks to create a just society for all. She summoned America to "compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man." In his inaugural address, Joe Biden affirmed his commitment to those basic things which define America: "Opportunity, security, liberty, dignity, respect, honor and, yes, the truth." It was important for him to distance the American presidency from the policies of his predecessor. Biden's cabinet-level appointments affirmed the new directions. Representatives from different groups and races were appointed to cabinet-level positions. Again, it was in this context that the Symposium on Race took place.

The Symposium on Race challenged the University administration to do more to correct the racial imbalance. Speakers dwelled on the failure of the University to educate students on the history of anti-Black racism. It is a message that applied to many pre-University school districts in the country. History matters. Fittingly, keynote speaker Dr. Shannen Dee Williams noted that the time to relegate to footnotes the experiences of Black Catholics was over, adding "Black Catholic demands for reparation and justice also included the mandatory teaching of Black and

brown Catholic history in Catholic schools as well as in the nation's seminaries and women's religious formation programs." And institutions seemed ready to embrace the charge to educate the student body. In addition, the University has taken important steps to bring a change. Recently, Hathcock Hall, the newly renovated 58,000-square-foot computer science academic building on campus, was named in honor of Jessie S. Hathcock, an African American who graduated from the University of Dayton in 1930. The University Inclusive Excellence Council released a 2021 annual report, affirming that the crusade against anti-Black racism was an integral part of the drive to advance inclusive excellence for the common good at the University of Dayton and beyond. And so, it goes.

Finally, in an age when concepts such as "critical race theory" have been spun into a rallying point for opponents to the teaching of the history of anti-Black racism, the symposium proved that a particularly urgent aspect of the cure to racism is the reeducation of the student population on basic facts that shaped America's racial experience such as the three-fifths compromise, Jim Crow, the Dred Scott decision, Plessy vs. Ferguson, and so on. History is messy, but it serves as a rear-view mirror to understand the present and shape the future. It challenges students to begin to think differently. If UD's curriculum is reformed to seriously engage those basic issues and more, then the symposium will have achieved a part of its goal.



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